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Cameo Portraiture in America

Howard M. Chapin

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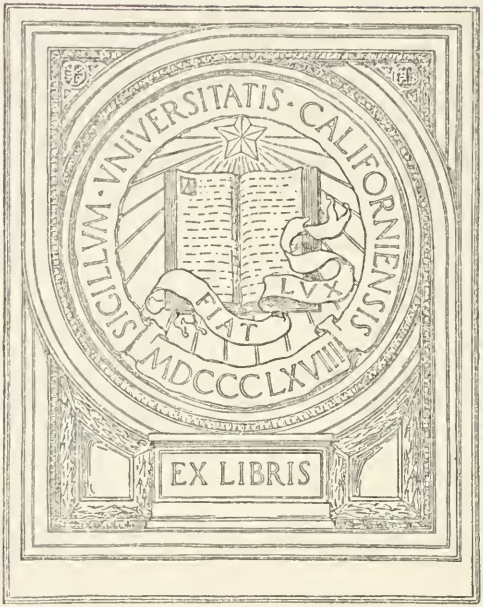

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CAMEO PORTRAIT OF

JANE CATHERINE LOUISE
VALUE CHAPIN

Cut by Annable about 1850.

CAMEO PORTRAITURE IN AMERICA

BY
HOWARD M. CHAPIN

ILLUSTRATED

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I AM deeply indebted to Mr. Lawrence Park, Mrs. Joseph T. A. Eddy, and the Museum of Fine Arts, at Boston, for their assistance and coöperation; to Professor William C. Poland, Mr. Charles Henry Hart, Mr. Charles K. Bolton, Mr. Howard W. Preston, and Mr. L. Earle Rowe for their suggestions and interest; and to the printed works of Isabel Moore, Francis Hobart Herrick, and C. Hart Merriam.

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CAMEO PORTRAITURE IN AMERICA

A CAMEO is an engraving cut in relief upon stone, shell, glass, or other hard substance having two or more layers of color, and so treated as to utilize the effect of the variety of coloring. Although this is the common usage of the word "cameo," it is given as its second meaning in most dictionaries, which give for its first meaning an engraving in

relief as distinguished from an intaglio. The derivation of the word "cameo" has not been traced.

Cameos are usually cut in agates, sardonyx being the best adapted to the purpose, or in certain tropical shells having two layers of color. These shells are found at the Isle of Bourbon, near Madagascar, at Ceylon, and at some of the West Indies. On account of the fact that those shells from Ceylon were shipped to Europe *via* Calcutta, the shells used for cameos are often called "Calcutta shells."

Among the substances less commonly utilized for making cameos are certain birds' eggs, glass, glass paste, lava, coral, and various hard minerals.

The art of cutting gems and semi-precious stones in low relief goes back many centuries before Christ. The earliest cameo now known is the stone in the ring of Polycrates, which was carved by Theodorus of Samos in the sixth century before Christ.

The art of cameo-cutting was practiced extensively by the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, but fell into disuse dur-

ing the fourth century A.D., and although occasionally practiced was not revived upon a large scale until the fifteenth century. Then it came into vogue in Italy and spread to France, where for a time it was extensively cultivated. At present very little cameo-cutting is done outside of Italy.

My interest in portrait cameos was first aroused by a gift from my aunt of shell-cameo portraits of my grandfather and grandmother.

My historical point of view naturally led me to study the antiquity of cameo portraiture.

CAMEO PORTRAIT OF
DR. J. B. CHAPIN
Cut by Annable about 1850.

Cameos, you doubtless realize, are generally cut in allegorical or ornamental designs, but cameo portraiture has been occasionally practiced.

The earliest extant cameo portrait is that of Ptolemy II and his first wife, Arsinoë. It dates from between 285 and 279 B.C., having been cut in a three-layer block of sardonyx six and a quarter inches long by five inches wide. This cameo, usually known as the "Gonzaga Cameo," is now preserved at the Hermitage in Petrograd.

A slightly smaller nine-layer

sardonyx cameo portrait of Ptolemy II and his second wife, also named Arsinoë, is preserved in Vienna.

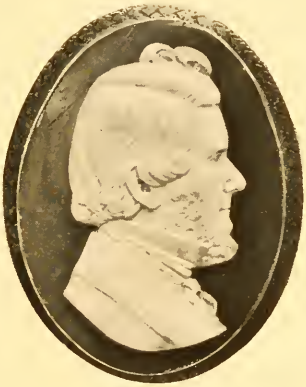
Cameo portraits of Demetrius Sotor and his wife Laodice, of Augustus, of Livia, and of Germanicus are extant, the latter being by the artist Epitynchamus. A later cameo portrait is considered to bear the likeness of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina. Constantine's portrait was also cut in cameo, but after his time the art declined.

Cameo portraiture was revived in the Renaissance.

Likenesses of Francis I and his Queen, of Charles V, of Philip II, of Jerome Savonarola, and of King Réné were cut in cameo. A cameo portrait of Alexander de Medici was cut in plasma.

The most noted cameo artist of the later Renaissance was a Frenchman, called "Coldore," who cut in cameos the portraits of Henry IV, Louis XIII, and Queen Elizabeth.

Turning now to American cameo portraiture, I naturally began with those in my own possession and found that they were cut by a local sculptor, George O. Annable, of Provi-



CAMEO PORTRAIT OF
JAMES S. LINCOLN
Cut by Annable.

dence. He had studied drawing under my grandmother, and later, having chosen sculpture as his field, cut her likeness in cameo as a mark of his appreciation of her instruction and assistance. He also cut a portrait of my grandfather. The difference in the execution of the two cameos is striking; that of my grandmother shows the spirit of the artist at his best, executing an appreciation, while the other, though done gratuitously as a companion piece, clearly approaches in spirit the plane of a commercial commission.

CAMEO PORTRAITS OF THE
HUNT BROTHERS
Cut by William Morris Hunt.

George O. Annable, the son of Jeremiah and Mary B. Annable, was born about 1829. He had a studio in the Hoppin building in Providence, and in 1850 cut a cameo portrait of Dr. Nathan B. Crocker, the rector of St. John's Church.

The following account from the Providence *Journal* of January 18, 1851, gives us an idea of Annable's work and ambition.

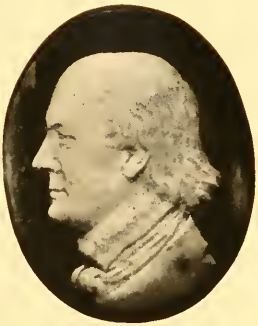
"Annable is dreaming of Italy and languishing for the commissions which would put him in possession of the means to go there to study. Mean-

while he is not idle, but is giving renewed demonstration of his genius for art by some highly successful specimens of cameo-cutting. The last and best we have seen is a spirited copy of the truly clerical head of the Rector of St. John's — a most excellent likeness. The sharpness of outline, and smoothness and delicacy of finish, of this little work, are really admirable." At the exhibition held in 1851 by the Rhode Island Society for the Encouragement of Domestic Industry George O. Annable received the highest prize, $10, for "medal-

lions and cameos, likenesses, very truthful, and also exhibiting a very commendable progress in the art."

In the printed report of that Society we find the following reference to this artist:

"With respect to the medallion heads and cameos by Mr. George O. Annable, of Providence, the committee heartily concur in the general expression of opinion. They are excellent; and considering the youth of the artist and the short time which has passed since his first work was produced — remarkably so."



CAMEO PORTRAIT OF
HORACE GREELEY
Cut by John C. King.

In 1853 cameos were exhibited by Annable and were described as "capital likenesses and finely executed." He received a silver medal, the highest premium, for portrait busts in marble and cameos.

Beside the portraits of Dr. Chapin, Mrs. Chapin, and Dr. Crocker, Annable cut a cameo likeness of James S. Lincoln, the portrait painter, who in exchange painted Annable's portrait. This cameo portrait of Lincoln is in the possession of Mrs. Joseph T. A. Eddy of Hingham. Annable's cameo

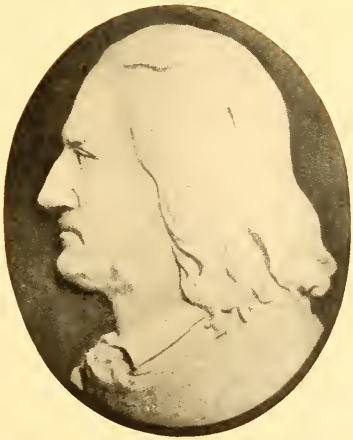
portraits were cut in shell and were usually about an inch and a half tall.

Annable married Miss Jane M. Tripp in Providence on June 2, 1863, and died in Brooklyn, N. Y., April 22, 1887. He was buried in the North Burial Ground in Providence on the 26th.

Extending my study from Providence to Boston, I found seven cameo portraits in the Museum of Fine Arts. Four of these were cut by William Morris Hunt and are mounted in a bracelet. They are likenesses of the four Hunt brothers,

Richard, Jonathan, Leavitt, and William Morris.

William Morris Hunt, the son of the Hon. Jonathan Hunt, was born at Brattleboro, Vermont, in 1824. He studied at Harvard, at Dusseldorf, and later under Couture, at Paris, where he became the friend of Millet. He returned to America in 1855 and resided for a while at Newport, after which he settled in Boston. In 1875 he published his "Talks on Art," and died in 1879. Although not exactly a Rhode Islander, he resided for a time at Newport, and two daughters



CAMEO PORTRAIT OF
JOHN J. AUDUBON
Cut by King about 1844.
From the Farwell Photograph

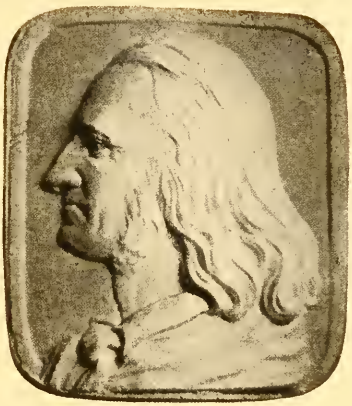
married into a prominent Rhode Island family, one becoming the wife of Samuel Slater, while her sister became the wife of Samuel Slater's father, Horatio Nelson Slater, Jr.

The Museum of Fine Arts also possesses two cameo portraits by John C. King. One is of Horace Greeley and the other of Benjamin Franklin. About 1844 King cut a cameo portrait of the naturalist Audubon. The following account of this cameo appears in an article by C. Hart Merriam in the *Auk* for October, 1908: "My father and Mr. King were

great friends, and on one occasion, when father dropped into Mr. King's studio, he found Mr. Audubon sitting for the cameo. Mr. King introduced the two gentlemen and asked them to start a conversation, which was continued during the sitting. The two men became so animated in their interesting conversation that they forgot where they were, and thus the artist was enabled to catch the natural and striking expression of the great ornithologist." A photograph of a cast made from this cameo was presented by King to Mr. O. Atkins Far-

well of Detroit in 1871, and a cast of another cameo of Audubon, made by King between 1840 and 1845, was given by the sculptor to Mr. Frederic H. Kennard of Boston. The original cameos which were cut in shell were not located by Mr. Merriam. A medallion from the Farwell photograph is reproduced on the cover of Francis Hobart Herrick's "Audubon the Naturalist."

John Crookshanks King was born at Kilwinning, Ayrshire, Scotland, October 11, 1806. He attended school until about fifteen years old and then be-



CAMEO PORTRAIT OF
JOHN J. AUDUBON
Cut by King.
From the Kennard cast

came a machinist's apprentice, although devoting his spare hours to drawing and painting. He came to America in 1829, and in 1832 met Hiram Powers, through whose influence he took up sculpture. In 1840 he settled in New Orleans, where he made marble busts and cut portrait cameos. He soon moved to Boston, where he had a studio and continued his work until his death, in April 1882, and was buried at Mount Auburn. He was unusually fond of animals, especially birds.

The other cameo portrait in the Museum of Fine Arts is of

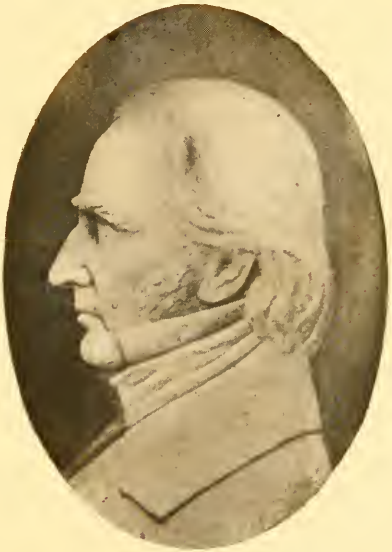
CAMEO PORTRAIT OF
JOHN HUTTON
Cut by Saint-Gaudens.

the Hon. George Morey. It is considered to be American work, but its sculptor is unknown.

The public collections of New York and Philadelphia proved barren to my search.

But in Maitland Armstrong's recollections of Saint-Gaudens I found the following account of his cameo work:

"Saint-Gaudens often told me of the trials he had suffered as apprentice to a cameo-cutter, a Frenchman, who spent his holidays and Sundays in shooting snipe on the Weehawken Flats. The young craftsman



CAMEO PORTRAIT OF

REV. EPHRAIM ABBOT, 1779–1870

Cut by Margaret Foley

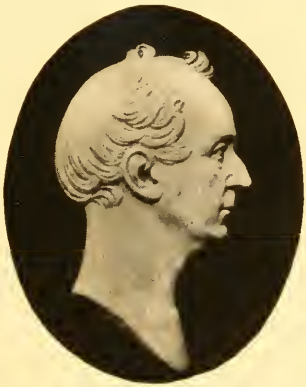
was compelled to walk all day, lugging his master's game bag and running after the snipe he shot. Never would he admit, even in confidence, that the bag was a heavy one, so loath was he to give 'that fellow' credit for anything; but there is not much hazard in the guess that snipe were then in a more flourishing condition on the 'Flats' than is the case to-day, and that the sport was pretty good for the master.

"Cameo-cutting was soon abandoned, but not before Saint-Gaudens had become very skillful at the trade."

Still more pertinent to our quest is the account in Isabel Moore's "Talks in a Library with Laurence Hutton," wherein Hutton said: "That eight dollars — the first money I ever made for myself — was invested in a sentimental way, in the gold setting, as a finger ring, of a small, shell-cameo profile protrait of the father, cut by a boy of about my own age, with whom then I had but slight acquaintance, but who, in later years, has become my very good friend. His name is Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Very many years later a shell-

cameo brooch, in what is called a shadow-frame, had its place in the Thirty-fourth Street house, upon the piano in the dining-room; and one night at a dinner party, at which were gathered many distinguished men and women to meet Sir Henry Irving, the box and its contents attracted the attention of a guest who happened to sit opposite to it. In the middle of the symposium he jumped up, grasped the object in both hands, and said: 'Laurence, where did you get this, and who is it?'

"'It's my father, given by



CAMEO PORTRAIT OF

HON. GEORGE MOREY

Artist unknown, but said to have been an American

him to my mother on the twenty-fifth anniversary of their marriage. She wore it a little while, but it was too conspicuous as a personal ornament; and after his death she put it in that frame.'

"The excited guest exclaimed:

"'Your father?'

"'Yes, my father.'

"He then asked in great excitement who did it.

"I replied: 'I don't know. It was cut long ago by a little artist in a studio over Brougham's Lyceum, afterwards Wallack's Theatre, on the corner of Broadway and Broome

Street. Who he was or what his name was, I do not know, except that he was a clever little Frenchman.'

"The attention of the whole party was by this time attracted to the dialogue. Looking at the cameo in its case, and his hand shaking a little, the guest said:

"'He was a clever little Frenchman, was he, and you don't know his name? Well, I'm the clever little Frenchman, and my name is Saint-Gaudens. It's the earliest piece of my work extant, and when you and Mrs. Hutton get

through with it, I want it for Gussie and the boy.'

"And when we do get through with it they are to have it."

At the suggestion of Mr. Bolton, I wrote to Mr. Lawrence Park of Boston, in the hope that he might know of some portrait-cameos, and he surpassed our expectations in being himself the possessor of a portrait-cameo by Margaret Foley. This cameo is the likeness of Rev. Ephraim Abbott, a great-uncle of Mr. Park.

Biographers differ as to where Margaret Foley, or Margaret E. Foley, as she is sometimes

called, was born. Some give her birthplace as Vermont, while others place it in New Hampshire. She was apparently largely self-instructed in her artistic work.

Mrs. Clements says of her: "At length she made some reputation in Boston, where she cut portrait and ideal heads in cameo. She then went to Rome." Some of her works were exhibited at the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia in 1876. Tuckerman wrote of her that she "achieves new and constant success in her relievos." Her medallions of Wil-

liam and Mary Howitt, of Longfellow, and of William Cullen Bryant, and her ideal statues of Cleopatra, of Excelsior, and of Jeremiah are considered to be the best specimens of her cameo work.

She died in 1877 at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Howitt, at Menan in the Austrian Tyrol.

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